DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 113 CE 078 788

TITLE	Round Table on Vocational Education and Training against Social Exclusion (Bohinj, Slovenia, October 4-6, 1998). Conclusions. Skills Needs Analysis.
INSTITUTION	European Training Foundation, Turin (Italy).
PUB DATE	1998-10-00
NOTE	11p.
AVAILABLE FROM	European Training Foundation, Villa Gualine-Viale Settimio Severo 65, I-10133, Turin, Italy; Web site: http://www.etf.it (full text).
PUB TYPE	Reports - General (140)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Continuing Education; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Dropout Prevention; Educational Needs; Foreign Countries; Needs Assessment; Role of Education; Secondary Education; Socioeconomic Status; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	Europe (Central); Europe (East); *Hungary; *Slovenia

ABSTRACT

Some 40 individuals from 12 Central and Eastern European partner countries and experts from Austria, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom participated in a roundtable session designed to stimulate discussion and action on reforming vocational education and training (VET) so that it can prevent youths from dropping out of school and experiencing social exclusion. Special attention was paid to the experiences of Slovenia and Hungary. These experiences were compared to those of European Union countries, where dropouts are finding it increasingly difficult to get jobs. Conclusions were as follows: (1) school leavers without vocational qualifications risk social exclusion; (2) dropout prevention should focus on improving the quality and relevance of general education and the labor market relevance of vocational education; (3) specific initial approaches should target those students in need of support; and (4) continuing training measures for young adults should be developed. (MN)

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Skills Needs Analysis

ED 431 113

Round table on vocational education and training against social exclusion

Bohinj (Slovenia), 4-6 October, 1998.

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CONCLUSIONS FROM THE EUROPEAN TRAINING FOUNDATION
ROUND TABLE ON
"VOCATIONAL EDUCATION and TRAINING AGAINST SOCIAL EXCLUSION"

organized in

BOHINJ (SLOVENIA), OCTOBER 4-6, 1998.

Main conclusions

School leavers without vocational qualification risk social exclusion. This is generally the case but is increasingly evident in the candidate countries, where young people without vocational qualifications are less and less able to find a job.

Action to reduce the problem of school leavers without vocational qualifications should focus on 3 areas:

- prevention by improving the quality and relevance of general education and by increasing the labour market relevance of vocational education;
- target group specific approaches in initial vocational education for those students needing specific support;
- specific continuing training measures for young adults without qualifications.

Every country must find its own solutions related to the specific social, economic and political situation. However, information on approaches in the EU Member States and exchanges of experience among the partner countries are helpful to support the development of appropriate solutions.

The first step towards appropriate solutions should be the development of national concepts for using vocational education and training as an instrument to combat social exclusion. The European Training Foundation was asked to support this process of national discussion.

Introduction

The round table was jointly organized by the Foundation and the Slovenian Phare Vocational Education and Training Reform Programme Management Unit. It was attended by some 40 participants. They came from 12 partner countries of Central and Eastern Europe and represented Ministries of Education, Labour, National Employment Services, National Observatories and research institutes. In addition, experts from Austria, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom were invited to present and discuss the experiences from their respective countries. The chairperson of the European Training Foundation's Advisory Forum's subgroup on "Vocational Education and Training against social exclusion", Mrs. Toktosh Aitikeeva (Kyrgyzstan), also took part.

The meeting was held in Slovenia to stimulate discussion and action on the basis of experiences from two particular partner countries, Slovenia and Hungary. Meeting in one of the partner countries provides the additional advantage of being able to invite a larger group of participants from the hosting country. The experience from Slovenia has learned that this greatly contributes to strengthening national networking. This proved to be a successful initiative that is worth repeating in the future.

The problem of school drop out

The round table was opened by Mrs. Zdenka Kovac, State Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs. Mrs. Kovac stressed the aim of the Slovenian Government to provide all young adults with a complete and recognised qualification. This reflects the awareness that a small country like Slovenia has to invest in and make optimal use of its principal capital: human resources, both for economic and social reasons. At present about one third of each cohort leaves school without a qualification. High priority is now being given to reduce the number of school leavers without qualifications from initial education and to create opportunities to achieve a formal qualification for those young adults who are unemployed and are without any. Mrs. Kovac confirmed her determination to combat social exclusion amongst others by developing a flexible and high quality system of vocational education and training. Slovenia is only at the beginning of this process and hopes to profit from the experience of other countries, both EU member states and partners countries.

The situation in Slovenia and Hungary

Overall, the information concerning the drop out phenomenon is rather poor in Slovenia, however the presentation of the Slovenian situation included a description of the drop out developments by Ms. Mojca Polak of the National Observatory. Each year about 6,000 young people leave school without any qualifications. They include students that did not finish primary school (about 3,000 annually), that did not continue education after primary school and those who dropped out from secondary schools, usually in the early years. Increasingly, adult education becomes an alternative – and second chance – learning route. Drop-out rates are particularly high in vocational education but there is little knowledge about the exact reasons for this.

This presentation was followed by an overview of existing legal possibilities to prevent drop out and reduce its negative impact by Mr.Bostjan Zgonc, Under Secretary of State of the Ministry of Education and Sport. The existing legal and institutional framework provides many opportunities to either prevent drop out or to offer special educational programmes for groups at risk. Much of this, however, is still in an early phase of implementation and many elements still need to be developed. This is particularly the case for alternative – and modular based - teaching methods and for a flexible system of certification and qualification.

Mrs. Meri Lorencic from the National Employment Office presented a major programme aimed at qualifying 5,000 unemployed young adults, jointly developed and financed by the Ministries of Education and Labour. The programme is presently being implemented on an experimental basis for qualifications at the secondary (skilled worker) level. It implies the development of close co-operation at the local and regional level between public administration, schools and employment offices.

The Hungarian experience of the last 20 years was presented by Mr. Janos Jakab, of the Ministry of Education and by Mrs. Ilona Lisko and Mr. Peter Farkas from the Research Institute of Education in Budapest. Hungary recognised the problem of school drop outs before the changes of the 1990s and has been actively involved in research and policy-making in the field of disadvantaged youth since then. The school drop out issue has always been part of the larger social issue of integration of the Roma population. Since the 1990s the issue has become closely related to increasing unemployment and the development of a large group of long-term unemployed especially from among those without qualifications. It has also been recognised that the main problem lies in the quality of primary school education. There is a high diversity in quality among Hungarian primary schools.

The decentralisation of the Hungarian school system in the 1980s, which was accompanied later by a funding mechanism based on the number of students, has prompted many local authorities and schools to try harder to keep students in school. However, this has not always been accompanied by high educational quality standards. Since the early 1990s, national initiatives have been taken to develop a network of special educational institutions for drop-outs from primary education. With the help of national and international (EU Phare programme) funds, special educational programmes and teaching approaches for these youth groups have been developed. The challenge is now to consolidate these efforts, to prepare professional staff, to improve integration within the formal education system and to develop more demanding levels and types of qualification. The basic challenge, however, remains the radical improvement of primary education.

Developments in other partner countries

The discussion showed that the school drop-out issue is not yet high on the political agenda in most of the partner countries. In many countries there is also little systematic information available about the phenomenon, both concerning its quantitative dimensions and in terms of analysis of causes and consequences. While awareness is growing, especially among researchers, those involved in employment services, education and labour market measures have so far not strategically addressed the issue.

There are obviously fundamental differences between those partner countries that have the status of candidate countries and those that are not yet included in the first round of preparation for EU accession. The discussion also made clear that the situation in the New Independent States, and especially those in Central Asia, is in many ways not comparable to the European partner countries.

All countries differ in terms of the nature of the social, political and economic situation. In particular, they differ with respect to the state of the public budget, the degree of poverty among the population, extent of ethnic minority groups within society, the development of the educational system, of the employment system etc. These differences create different contexts for the common problem of school drop-out that also influences the degree of priority given to it by policy makers and to their opportunities to tackle the problem.

The ongoing reforms of initial vocational education systems in many countries remain in their pilot phases. The reforms have largely focused on modernizing curricula by making them more labour-market relevant. In general, education systems are still very much knowledge oriented and teachers use classical subject based and frontal teaching styles. However, reforms have rarely entered the domain of primary education and if so have concentrated on mainstream and "successful" students rather than on students with special needs. Experiments that attempt to search for new learning approaches, such as combining learning and working, do exist but are relatively few and have not been integrated in the systems at large.

At higher levels in the education systems, bridges and pathways have been created to allow secondary school graduates to achieve vocational qualifications or to continue in higher education. However, vocational education is increasingly catering for those who have "failed" in general education. The societal status of vocational education therefore is often decreasing. In some countries, educational reforms include measures to improve and postpone vocational choices to later stages, either by prolonging primary education or by introducing common years of education in secondary schools. By and large, however, educational systems continue to produce drop-outs.

Even reformed educational systems are producing school leavers without vocational qualifications. Awareness is growing that these young people cannot be left on their own with the prospect of lifelong unemployment. They need special attention. However, at present, there is little initiative in the majority of the partner countries to develop measures for groups which need specific support in initial vocational education and for young marginalised adults in continuing vocational training. Several reasons for this have been mentioned and reflect the tremendous social and economic differences among the partner countries.

The main initiator of measures for early school leavers and young adults without qualifications has in all countries been the National Employment Service. However, this is often a young institution and most often its principle function has been the registration of unemployed people and the payment of their benefits. Its role in developing and implementing active labour market policy is often increasing but in practice activities are still limited, both in terms of funds spent on such measures and in terms of number of persons covered by them. Most retraining activities do not include qualification measures. Employment services are faced with tremendous financial and professional capacity problems. Also, there are only few institutions outside the employment service that can assist in the implementation of measures. A true transition-from-school-to work

infrastructure has not been developed yet. In many countries, this is actually the domain of relatively small foreign assistance based projects.

Furthermore, the traditionally well-developed continuing training infrastructure that used to provide second chance opportunities for those who were employed has largely collapsed as both the state and companies have been forced to withdraw funding. The new market oriented further training structures that are now developing are largely focused on those who have already qualifications and are employed. As these are mainly commercial organizations they depend on financial contributions from participants or from their employers. They also tend to be classical courses and knowledge based forms of training. The quality of these commercial training providers is very uneven.

Experiences from EU countries

The principal experience from EU countries is that people who are without a vocational qualification are less and less able to find a job. Everywhere, those without (or with low levels of qualification) are among the core of the long-term unemployed. The lack of a vocational qualification negatively affects peoples' employability and is a major reason for social exclusion. Increasingly, it has been recognised therefore that policies should aim at providing all school-leavers and adults with a recognised qualification.

Action in most EU countries has focused largely on 3 areas:

- Prevention of drop out from initial and secondary education by improving the quality of education, and more in particular by making it more labour market relevant and responsive to needs and interests of individual students. Prevention can also be achieved by improving vocational counselling and guidance.
- Target group specific approaches in initial vocational education. Such initiatives have become part of the new infrastructure of transition-from-school-to-work that has been developed in all EU countries in response to increasing problems that young people have been facing in finding employment.
- Continuing training measures for young adults without initial qualifications through the creation of alternative paths (largely outside the formal school system), to recognised vocational qualifications. These measures have now become even more important within the perspective of preparing the potential workforce for lifelong learning.

The discussions in the 3 working groups (that were devoted to prevention, target group specific measures in initial vocational education and continuing training for young adults), showed that there was a high interest in the kind of policy initiatives that have been taken in EU countries. The experience from EU countries made it clear that measures are developed on a continuous trial-and-error basis indicating that problems have not yet been solved. They are covering all three dimensions and gradually have covered larger numbers of people. They also showed considerable differences in their design and objectives, which indicates that each country is searching particular solutions within its own national context. This in turn made it clear that there are no easy solutions that could be "copied" by partner countries. However, policy makers may profit from mistakes made over time by their EU colleagues and may also find it useful to adapt the basic principles and philosophies that have now developed.

The experiences presented included the "social guarantee programmes" from Spain where, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture, all young people between 16 and 21 who have not succeeded in the formal secondary education system to achieve a vocational qualification focusing on semi-skilled functions. Alternative vocational education programmes offer a target group specific approach that can respond to the particular education and training needs of very specific groups.

The Austrian experience is based on the policy of the employment service to prevent young people from becoming long-term unemployed (defined as longer then 6 months). In order to achieve this goal, a multitude of options have been developed and are presented to young unemployed people on a voluntary basis. These include alternative combinations of work and learning, second chance possibilities to acquire school certificates, transitions from unemployment into vocational education and training programs or temporary sheltered employment.

The philosophy in Germany is to provide a vocational qualification for all. For disadvantaged youth (e.g. leavers from special schools, early school-leavers, children of migrant workers) who do not manage to find an apprentice place in the dual system, special programmes have been developed. Whereas in 1980 at the start of these programmes 500 young people were involved, their number reached 60,000 in 1995. The following principles have been developed over time for disadvantaged youth programmes: they have to be target group specific; build on the competences that young people have and not depart from their deficits; combine a variety of learning places (schools, enterprises and projects); need teams of trainers, teachers and social pedagogues; and should include continuous and integrated staff training for such teams.

A recent initiative from the UK called "New Deal attempts to bring young adults (18-24) who have been registered as unemployed for longer than 6 months through individually targeted measures back into employment. The programme is obligatory, managed by the employment service and includes a combination of intensive personalized guidance and counseling, training and temporary subsidized job opportunities in private enterprises. New Deal basically aims at employment and not at achieving a recognized qualification. However, other policy initiatives are being developed in the UK to cater for other age groups (16-17 and those over 24 years of age) to qualitatively improve the nature of vocational education (New Apprenticeship).

All countries combine national funds with contributions from the European Social Funds (ESF) in order to finance their measures. This also explains the existence of a variety of local and regional initiatives within a nationally agreed framework. However, this assumes that at the local and regional level capacities exist to design and implement programmes of this kind. Most of all, they assume functioning networks of public administrations, educational and training institutions and enterprises.

Common issues that emerged from the discussions

The following issues emerged from the discussions among the representatives from partner countries. They refer to discussion topics that should be followed up, nationally and internationally, and they are based on the premise that the issue in general on disadvantaged youth should be distinguished from measures for the physically as well as the mentally handicapped young people:

- There is an increased need for international information and exchange of experience that also should be organised on a regional basis between countries that share similar situations;
- The concepts and language used in EU countries (disadvantaged, disaffected, groups at risk, drop outs, target groups, employability, social exclusion, social cohesion) need clarification and familiarization;
- There is a need for support with analysis and policy development inside the countries;
- Many partner countries are faced with the social problem of the integration of ethnic minorities in society;
- National contexts are too divergent to develop uniform approaches valid for all partner countries: each country has to develop its own concept;
- Measures should avoid stigmatization and be focused on integration into the regular system;
- The role of the State and its cooperation with Non Governmental Organizations should be clarified, especially in terms of funding and implementation;
- The development of professional institutions catering for disadvantaged youth and young adults (programme development and implementation) needs to be promoted;
- Systems of quality assurance have to be developed, amongst others to allow for integration of programmes with the formal education system and its structure of qualifications;
- Competent staff have to be developed, including teachers, trainers and social pedagogues;
- Assessment methods for the creation of alternative learning places have to be developed;
- The availability of EU instruments for co-financing of measures offers realistic funding perspectives and also provides useful guidelines for the development of national concepts.

Next steps: towards the development of national concepts for Vocational Education and Training against social exclusion

Partner countries are interested in the development of national concepts with a view of using Vocational Education and Training as an instrument to combat social exclusion. This assumes first of all that a comprehensive analysis of the present situation is prepared to form the basis for a programme of action. While the responsibility and initiative for this principally lies with the partner countries themselves, the Foundation was asked to provide the following support:

- to assist National Observatories to undertake action-oriented studies into the nature, scope and consequences of early school leaving. The national studies should be designed and coordinated with the assistance of 1 or 2 EU experts in order to secure relevance of approach and outcomes within the context of recent European developments and future availability of EU funding mechanisms.

- the Advisory Forum Subgroup on Vocational Education and Training against social exclusion will be assisted by an EU expert. The work of the subgroup and its final report should be closely coordinated with the studies to be undertaken by the National Observatories.

- a comparative evaluation of Phare sponsored Disadvantaged Youth programmes in Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia (and eventually other countries) should be undertaken and made available for other partner countries.

- a system of electronic networking should be set up to secure follow-up information exchange among the participants of the round table. The network should be connected to the existing Observatory network and should gradually include an increasing number of people from within each partner country. Slovenia has offered to manage the network with Foundation support. Follow-up activities may be organized for and by network members. Details of this will have to be elaborated further.

- within the context of the Foundation's responsibility for preparation of the partner countries for structural funding, special attention should be given to the present Objective 3: Combating long-term unemployment and facilitating integration into the labour market of young people and people exposed to exclusion from the labour market. This objective also promotes equal opportunities for men and women and does not restrict interventions to specific regions.

- the Foundation should include in its work programme for the year 2000 a pilot project for vocational education and training for disadvantaged youth. All activities mentioned earlier are to be seen in support of developing this project.